DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 355 800 FL 021 063

AUTHOR Mann, Jesse Thomas
TITLE The Language of Language: An Interdisciplinary Approach To Language Learning.
PUB DATE 93
NOTE 7p.; For serial issue in which this paper appears, see FL 021 050.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Mid-Atlantic Journal of Foreign Language Pedagogy; v1 p149-154 Spr 1993

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Course Descriptions; Cultural Awareness; Higher Education; *Interdisciplinary Approach; Majors (Students); *Program Descriptions; Second Language Instruction; *Second Language Learning
IDENTIFIERS *Westminster College PA

ABSTRACT

The study of language in general and the study of foreign languages in particular have attracted new interest in academic circles during the past decade. The concepts of the "global village" and "cultural diversity" have become commonplace in the jargon of the 1990s. The development of two new courses at Westminster College (Pennsylvania) have been an attempt to address some of these concerns. The "World of Language" course discussed in this study aimed to provide concrete and theoretical approaches to the study of language in order to enhance the undergraduate language experience and to give a context to the language students' exploration that linked the course material in a direct fashion either to an area of professional interest or to their major field of study. Outside lectures included: (1) biology--language and the brain; (2) sociology--symbolic interactionism; (3) religion--language and metaphor; (4) philosophy--language and meaning; (5) psychology--animal communication; (6) mathematics--artificial intelligence. Residual effects of this course are meant not only to begin an exploration of the language major but to: lead students to an understanding of self; help them piece together some of the different components of their general education curriculum; and relate their liberal studies courses to their major. In other words to query: what kinds of questions might physics ask about language? (VWL/AA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED355800

THE LANGUAGE OF LANGUAGE: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO LANGUAGE LEARNING

Jesse Thomas Mann
Associate Professor of French and
Associate Dean of the College
Westminster College
New Wilmington, PA 16172-0001

Abstract

That language fundamentally defines our thinking and our existence can hardly be denied. It is linked closely with the concept of self, and we use it to name and thus shape our world. Language penetrates all disciplines and provides a topic that is truly interdisciplinary in nature.

The study of language in general and the study of foreign languages in particular have attracted renewed interest in academic circles during the past decade. The concepts of the "global village" and "cultural diversity" have become commonplace in the jargon of the 1990s. And though the words may be as commonplace and meaningless as "Have a nice day" was in the 1970s, the concepts retain an important sense of urgency. Now, as some of the effects of cultural diversity begin to appear on college campuses and are being met by a rise in systematic racism and sexism, we must continue to define the role that higher education will play in this arena.

The development of the two new courses at Westminster College have been an attempt to address some of these concerns. The "World of Language" courses aim to provide concrete and theoretical approaches to the study of language in order to enhance the undergraduate language experience and to give a context to the language students' exploration that is the "major." A further residual effect is that they can enhance the non-language students' definition of their major and help them to articulate questions to take back "home" with them.

Physics shows us that while the world shapes us, the language that we use shapes the world. We might even say the language that we *are* shapes the world, for language undoubtedly defines us more profoundly than we can begin to imagine. (Gregory 1988: 200). That language fundamentally defines our thinking and our existence can hardly be denied. It is linked closely with the concept of self, and we use it, as the preceding quote indicates, to name and thus shape our world. Physics and language certainly make strange partners, but the study of language continues to stretch its horizons to include many disciplines. Language penetrates all disciplines and provides a topic that is truly interdisciplinary in nature.

The study of language in general and the study of foreign languages in particular have attracted renewed interest in academic circles during the past decade. The concepts of the "global village" and "cultural diversity" have become commonplace in the jargon of the 1990s. And though the words may be as commonplace and meaningless as "Have a nice day" was in the 1970s, the concepts retain an important sense of urgency. Now, as some of the effects of cultural diversity begin to appear on college campuses and are being met by a rise in systematic racism and sexism, we must continue to define the role that higher education will play in this arena.

The Department of Foreign Languages (DFL) at Westminster College[1], like many departments, had not made major curricular changes for a long period of time. The department was influenced in the early 1980s by the Dartmouth method pioneered by John Rassias, and then it became involved fairly early on in the ACTFL/ETS Proficiency movement. These new perspectives on foreign language pedagogy heightened an awareness of the need for change. In

FL 021 063

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Joseph J Wieczorek
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

addition to changing an approach to language teaching, the department also wanted to reconsider the ways in which it taught literature and culture classes both in English and the target languages. Yet the department found itself experiencing a certain malaise vis-à-vis its curriculum and major programs. Through a grant for $8,232.00 from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the DFL was able to bring a foreign language curriculum specialist to its campus to examine ways in which the program could be improved. Upon the specialist's suggestion two colleagues visited the University of Maryland (Baltimore County) to see their recent curricular changes, in particular to observe their new series of courses. After a visit to Maryland, it was decided that the DFL could benefit greatly from the implementation of a similar program; an outline was sketched for two courses based on the UMBC model.

In addition to revamping the curriculum, it was hoped to establish a more cohesive, interdisciplinary program for the DFL majors. Traditional foreign language curricula have included the study of language, literature, and culture (though the emphases have switched according to prevailing trends), but there has been little integration of these areas as witnessed in most catalogs that list separate courses in language, literature, and culture. The newly designed courses would serve as beginning level introductions to the study of language, culture and literature. In addition, they would create a first year experience that would draw majors into an interdisciplinary approach to the study of foreign languages and help them to understand better the "language" of their major.

This first year experience not only would acquaint students with their classmates who might share similar interests, but also could give them a shared academic experience as it relates to their major: a common ground, a common set of tools with which they could approach their study of language, literature, and culture. From this point, majors could complete their coursework and get together again in some fashion in the departmental senior capstone course where, again, their studies would be integrated. The approach provide them with an overarching perspective of their undergraduate experience.

The DFL turned once again to NEH for the grant money to realize this project and received $164,475.00. This funding was used over a period of eighteen months. The initial phase consisted of a five-week summer workshop for the foreign language faculty on campus. With the help of four guest lecturers and a great deal of work, the DFL was able to examine a variety of approaches to the analysis of literature and in particular to attempt to integrate literature with manifestations of traditional culture such as art, architecture, music, philosophy as well as with manifestations of popular culture such as film and advertising. The DFL was also able to benefit from the experts on syllabus design through participation in a FIPSE project to improve critical thinking which entailed detailed syllabus analysis. The project was to begin redesigning syllabi for our entire language/ literature/ culture curriculum.

The next phase — designing the two new courses — began the following summer. We spent a week as a department brainstorming about the two new courses and then divided into teams to design the courses. The course that the author chaired was called "The World of Language" ,and since he was only peripherally involved with the development of the other course, "Reading the World", only the language course will be discussed here.

The intent in the World of Language was to study language from an interdisciplinary perspective. To quote Field, Freeman, and Moorjani from UMBC, "we envisaged a set of courses introducing students first to the nature of language and other symbolic systems before training them in the skills required for analyzing all types of literary and non-literary texts. . . *The World of Language* was first designed within such a context and is therefore not to be considered as an alternative to literature, but as a building block for language, literature and other multi-disciplinary programs." (Field et al. 1984: 222) Students would explore language origins, acquisition and cross-cultural differences. Topics to examine included body language, gesture, the relationship between language and perception, artificial intelligence, and animal communication. The syllabus endured nine revisions during its summer preparation (and a subsequent revision after having been offered once) to achieve the most effective ordering of these topics in conjunction with the George Yule text, *The Study of Language*. (Yule 1985). We offered the course for the first time during the four-week January Interim in order to allow us the greatest amount of flexibility in planning curricular activities. Since students only enroll in one course, larger blocks of time are available for scheduling activities (videos, labs, etc.) Eighty-seven students enrolled in the course.

Because of the broad nature of the class, faculty was recruited not only with the help of the entire foreign language faculty but also from six disciplines outside of the Department of Foreign Languages. This meant that the DFL had to accommodate a total of twelve outside speakers in addition to the two faculty who met the class on a daily basis. In spite of the administrative nightmare of keeping a class coherent with so many outside speakers, the DFL truly profited from the individual expertise that each of the colleagues contributed. The outside lectures included:

1) biology: language and the brain
2) sociology: symbolic interactionism
3) religion: language and metaphor
4) philosophy: language and meaning
5) psychology: animal communication
6) mathematics: artificial intelligence

Furthermore, their participation supported the interdisciplinary nature of the course and at the same time provided a rather broad base for faculty support. Faculty from other disciplines were very enthusiastic in their evaluations of the course and consequently recommend the course to other faculty and encouraged their advisees to participate. Their participation also served to expose the students, the majority of whom were in their first year, to a larger cross-section of faculty than did courses taken by many of their peers. During the second run of this course, students were able to become acquainted with faculty but also with a few administrators (viz., the Dean and Associate Dean of the College).

Many of the extra faculty agreed to assist students in the preparation of their final projects for the course. Because of the exceedingly large number of students, most disciplines were represented; therefore, students were able to work directly with faculty in areas of specific interest to them. In one instance, a student who wanted to study animal communication in depth prearranged a co-presentation with the professor.

The students, when polled, were particularly enthusiastic about their ability to link the course material in a direct fashion either to an area of personal interest or to their major field of study. And as students usually do, they came up with some of the most innovative topics for language study: the language of hula dancing, the analysis of infant cries to diagnose birth defects, the power of language as it relates to cults, and many others. These students made connections and it is precisely these connections that we hope to realize in an interdisciplinary course. Current theories of learning also support the concept that if students make connections among the materials that they learn, then they learn more effectively and retain it longer.

The first run of the course in the January 1988 term was very successful. Evaluations by students and visiting faculty demonstrated that the DFL had indeed accomplished most of the established goals; they also drew attention to some areas where the DFL needed to strengthen the above-mentioned connections. The reworking of the syllabus during the summer of 1989 to accommodate a normal term was very challenging. Many of the activities had to be dropped because of time constraints and lectures had to be limited to the normal ninety-minute periods (two days a week). The results, however, were satisfying in that very little content was sacrificed, and in some ways, the course profited from measures to streamline and condense materials and activities. From a campus point of view, the DFL was able to recruit all but one of the previous (outside) guest lecturers. This provided us a means of keeping the course fresh in the minds of colleagues who continue to support it.

The Department of Foreign Languages believes that students have profited from the course in a number of ways. First, they have new insights into their major language that they study. They have a better understanding of the workings of language and assimilate grammatical material more efficiently. Second, many language majors decide to study a second foreign language because of their renewed enthusiasm for language study, not only boosting departmental enrollments but also solidifying the processes by which they learn another language: such processes become more facilitated as they study additional languages. Third, because a modified Rassias approach was used in our classrooms, language students served as apprentice teachers, leading drill sessions for their peers in beginning and intermediate language classes. The DFL noticed an improvement from a pedagogical perspective in the language learning that occurs in these drills. As students understand more about the nature of language, they increase their sensitivity to foreign language instruction. Many of our students have been students in drill sessions and then have had the opportunity to conduct one. This proves to be a wonderful experience and some students have actually offered drills in different languages. Fourth, students who are preparing to teach foreign languages are better prepared to take certification proficiency tests in their major.

But the list of pedagogical implications does not end here; this is just a beginning. In addition to gaining a better understanding of their major, students also begin to see the connection that language has with other disciplines. And if language study is to continue to thrive, it needs to define itself in terms of a curriculum as a whole in an interdisciplinary setting. The study of language provides an efficient vehicle for interdisciplinary courses and in particular freshman experience courses. I believe that a course that is interdisciplinary and offers different perspectives is ideal for the freshman experience because it provides a forum for students to interact with a variety of ideas and faculty members. Detractors may argue that in an interdisciplinary course that students receive no real depth and approach a topic solely from a

superficial level. The most cogent response to this concern is that most introductory courses are cursory by definition and the entire concept behind a coordinated core of courses is to progress in skills at each successive level.

Botstein quotes that the "undergraduate curriculum is out of touch with academic knowledge." (Desruisseaux 1990: A13) He proposed that the disciplinary framework is out of sync with the actual fields. I believe that interdisciplinary courses can and should respond to this challenge. Interdisciplinary suggests by definition "involving one or more disciplines" but another meaning of the prefix "inter" incorporates the concept of "reciprocity." That is, that there is give and take among disciplines. *Interdisciplinary* courses also more accurately reflect life: unfortunately, our lives do not seem to be compartmentalized to the extent that we can solve problems by choosing one from column A and one from column B. There is a mismatch between the cafeteria style of general education and real life.

Botstein advocates the reorganization around "areas, questions, issues, methodologies and not necessarily along the lines of traditional departments." (Desruisseaux 1990: A17) This would, of course, have tremendous implications for the hiring of future faculty, and Botstein concludes that "the governance of the university militates against any serious work being done" and that "you can't have a normal departmental structure and really talk about rethinking the major." (Desruisseaux 1990: A17)

Further research in this area should help us to define more precisely the role that language study can and should play not only in relation to the curriculum of departments of foreign language and English, but also to the curriculum as a whole. The development of the two new courses at Westminster has been an attempt to address some of these concerns. The malaise that we felt about the major is perhaps best articulated by a series of reports that the American Association of Colleges has recently issued concerning the major.

> For students, learning in the major means learning to take part in a continuing exploration. The role of faculty members is to provide structure and languages that support this participation: structures and languages that enhance and challenge students' capacities to frame issues, to test hypotheses and arguments against evidence, and to address disputed claims.

(AAC 1990: 4-5)

The *World of Language* course aims to provide concrete and theoretical approaches to the study of language in order to enhance the undergraduate language experience and to give a context to the language students' exploration that is the "major." A further residual effect is that it can enhance the non-language students' definition of their major and help them to articulate questions to take back "home" with them.

> "A student enters the *home* offered by the major in order, finally, to be able to leave it and see it from the outside in, by taking the knowledge, experience, and wisdom gained therein and testing them against the perspectives of other fields and the challenge of the world outside."

(AAC 1990: 5)

The residual effect that we are looking for is not simply a course to begin the exploration of the language major but also one that can: (1) lead students to an understanding of self; (2) help them piece together some of the different components of their general education curriculum; and (3), relate their liberal studies courses to their major. In other words to query: what kinds of questions might physics ask about language?

Endnotes

1. Westminster is a small liberal arts college of about 1400 students located in a small town in northwestern Pennsylvania. There is a language requirement of one year of beginning level language (or two years of high school language study) and then either another two language courses or two courses in our literature/culture in translation track.

References

Desruisseaux, Paul. 1990. "Undergraduate Curriculum out of Touch with Academic Knowledge, Colleges Told." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 24 January pp. A-13, A-17

Field, Thomas T., Lawrence H. Freeman and Angela B. Moorjani. 1984. "*Introducing The World of Language: A Linguistic Basis for Language Study.*" *Modern Language Journal*, 68, iii.

Gregory, Bruce. *1988. Inventing Reality.* New York: Wiley.

National Advisory Committee formed by the American Association of Colleges. 1990. *The Challenge of Connected Learning.* Washington, D.C.: AAC.

Yule, George. 1985. *The Study of Language.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.